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Top defense intelligence official says foreign language critical to national security

MONTEREY, Calif. – Few people can claim they have been portrayed in a major Hollywood movie as a result of their actions during their government careers. Even fewer can say they contributed to the success of two major covert operations in the history of the United States.

Michael G. Vickers, a two-time Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center graduate and currently the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, can take credit for both, though he is reluctant to admit it.



In the 2007 movie *Charlie Wilson's War*, Vickers was depicted as a young paramilitary operations officer who contributed with "brains and brawn" to the withdrawal of Russian troops from Afghanistan in the mid 1980s. In more recent history, Vickers has been recognized as a man who was instrumental in the planning, finding, and killing of the world's most wanted terrorist, Usama Bin Ladin.

But Vickers says that it was technology and a combination of human intelligence that really contributed to the catch. "Human intelligence, signals intelligence and geo-spatial intelligence all played very important roles. A major part of the challenge of that operation was locating him in the first place, and that was a long time coming – a very patient intelligence operation," he explained.

In response to the question of whether or not the knowledge of language and culture contributed to the success of the operation, Vickers said, "Language and culture were very important in that hunt at various levels. And, I can't go into more detail – but, in each of those disciplines, the ability to have officers or translators who were fluent or very professionally competent in a language made all the difference."

A firm believer that foreign language knowledge "is critical for our national security," Vickers, who graduated from the DLIFLC Czech course in 1977 and Spanish course in 1979, has a good understanding of how vital this knowledge is for the success of military operations in the field. He spent

three years in Panama in a Special Operations unit in the 1980s, during a time when insurgency and terrorism were at an all time high in Central and South America.

"I taught classes to Latin American officers in Spanish and I worked with them on operations, so, it (language) not only helped me to communicate, but it also gave me a real insight into how they think and approach problems," he explained.

But, in a congressional hearing on Homeland Security and foreign language capacities held May 21, titled, "A National Security Crisis: Foreign Language Capabilities in the Federal Government," the discussion centered around the issue that not enough language capability is available within the DoD. "It's an area (foreign language proficiency), frankly, we still need to improve - both as an intelligence community and in the Special Operations field. It's very hard to maintain high levels of proficiency in languages if you're not using it all the time," explained Vickers, drawing from his own experience as a level 3/3 linguist in Spanish and Czech.



Offering incentives to those willing to maintain high language proficiency scores may be the answer, Vickers proposed.

"For example, Secretary of Defense (Leon) Panetta, when he was director at the CIA, mandated professional fluency in a foreign language to get promoted to the higher (grades) ... And, it certainly had an impact on the number of people working harder at it," he said, adding that the key to maintaining a pool of highly proficient linguists depends on the requirements put in place. "You just have to insist on the standards or it will never happen."

Reinforcing his position that foreign language instruction and training is vital to national security, Vickers said, "There is an inherent federal government responsibility, as we learned early in the Cold War with national security education ... Government investment in that is very important."

Aside from a government investment in the training of foreign languages that normally takes place during an individual's mid career, to meet Foreign Service or Special Operations requirements, Vickers concluded by saying, "A second point I would make is that early language education is critical," which is vital to providing candidates for that pool.

STORY BY

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Photo 1: Dr. Michael G. Vickers speaking with Afghan National Army soldiers and locals during one of his many trips to Afghanistan. (Photo courtesy of DoD)

Photo 2: Michael G. Vickers, Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence (Photo courtesy of DoD)